

P. India Children 4508

The Children of India

North American Section

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LIBRARY

There are so many interesting and beautiful things in India that young people who live in America, hearing about these, may sometimes imagine that it is a happy lot to have been born in that land where "Mango groves scent the air with their blossoms in spring and yield their abundant fruit in summer." But a close knowledge of the lives of boys and girls in India must make a true American shudder at the thought, and be thankful for the Christian land of his nativity. The vast majority of the inhabitants of this Oriental empire are too ignorant to understand or appreciate the magnificent monumental structures of carved marble and inlaid stone. And to



HINDU BABIES.

them the joys of Christian home-life are unknown.

About nine-tenths of the natives of India live in villages where their dwellings are mud huts, or booths of matting, with tiled or thatched roofs. Sometimes there is just one door and no window; when the door is closed, there is no light within the hut. Of one story only are the dwellings: if the family is fortunate enough to own a cow or a goat the shed for the animal is just adjoining the home. Stray donkeys and miserable dogs, with most horribly sore and dirty bodies, also hang around, on familiar terms with the children. Strange to say, there are no pigs, and yet an easily understood circumstance; for the Moslems of Northern India never eat pork, and only a few of the Hindu people eat any meat. With their hands women and children make forms of cow manure and plaster them up against the mud walls of their homes to dry in the sun for fuel.

As in all non-Christian lands, the lot of girls is much harder than that of boys. The Hindu believes that a son can perform certain rites and propitiate the gods, so that his father will be saved from future torment. When a girl is born the father thinks that some of the numerous gods have been offended, and as a punishment they have sent him "nothing," as he expresses it. The fathers want to get the daughters out of the family as soon as possible, and the custom of early marriage is therefore popular. Sometimes girls are promised as



AT A WELL. .

brides as soon as they are born, and married at about ten or twelve years of age.

In a village home where there are both boys and girls, the boys eat with their father; and then after the mother and sisters have served, they themselves eat whatever is left. Girls are not taught to read or write; they simply learn nothing but to do the hardest and most menial work. The high caste girls, and girls of refined homes in the cities, lead

lives of seclusion and idleness to a great extent. But some of them are highly accomplished, studying the sciences and languages, and enjoying a culture in Oriental luxury. Brahman priests scorn the idea of teaching girls anything; sometimes, indeed, they declare it is wicked to do so. Whatever the priests do teach the girls or boys is vile and degrading in moral tone, and parents have no more thoughts concerning the education of their children than for the cultivation of wild flowers. "Wild flowers" indeed and in truth, was the thought suggested when seeing some girls going through the park in a city in Southern India. Their faces were as rich in coloring, their eyes as softly bright and brown as the "black-eyed Susans" in the baskets which they bore upon their heads.

The children of India can learn rapidly when the lessons require only the faculty of memory; but when reasoning is demanded, they are deficient. There is a marked difference in the children of different castes. The higher classes can learn much more rapidly and clearly than others, owing to the heritage from scholarly parents. In villages there is generally some one who attempts to be a school master; quite frequently this is the Brahman priest. "There are no benches, or seats, or black-boards or desks in the school. The only piece of furniture is the master's stick. He refrains from using it when he is asleep." If he wishes to punish a boy he may require him to stand for

a time, on one foot; or if there is a convenient tree the master may force the boy to hang from a limb for a few minutes with his head downward. Only the children whose parents have some means can afford slates; these are really of wood, and chalk and water are used for writing on them. The poor boys use their fingers and write on dust or sand that is put upon the school floor for the purpose.

When boys and girls in India have partaken of the noon-day meal they always lie about, resting or sleeping for



GATHERING FLOWERS.

an hour or so. The climate is so warm and enervating at mid-day that it is out of the question to attempt work; and the temperament of the natives easily adapts itself to this custom. When resting they do not seem to seek the shade, but rather to luxuriate in the sun's rays; often a group of boys can be seen lying on the ground in the hot sunshine, when all around trees are shedding a wealth of shade. When the Indian boy is taking his siesta there is danger that a poisonous snake or bug may sting him; so it is fortunate that there is generally a crowd of boys and one is awake to see the harmful intruder's approach and give warning. Reptiles and ugly bugs abound in quantities. Sometimes they get into the houses, and the missionaries must make a habit of looking well at their clothing and into their shoes before they put these articles on. There are some snakes whose bite is most deadly, and a person only lives a few hours after having been bitten. There is in India a little animal called the mongoose, which is able to put up a good fight and generally kill the most deadly snakes. The mongoose, when he comes in contact with a snake, will parry and defend skillfully, until, just at a certain moment, he will make a leap and catch the snake's head, and he never lets go until he has shaken the life out of the reptile. Many boys have a pet mongoose, and they also have a musical instrument made out of a gourd. The music which they make on the gourd charms the snakes, they say;

and then, when the hideous, sinuous creature approaches, the little mongoose makes his attack, and it is soon over. These boy snake-charmers are always seen in places where European visitors go.

The dress of children in the East is always odd and unusual from our viewpoint. In the warm climate of India it is rather more the undress than the dress that at first strikes us. Until the children are about six or seven years old it seems to be considered quite unnecessary to clothe them at all ; however, an ornament of some kind seems to be always worn, either on a string around the waist or on a chain at the neck. As soon as the girls begin to don garments their ears are pierced and frequently their noses also ; in both ears and noses large rings are worn, sometimes the size of a bracelet. Often just a glittering stone is worn in the side of the nose. Girls also wear rings on their toes and bracelets, bangles and anklets, while a number of chains may hang about their necks. Subdued shades, of rich colors, are worn, in meagre, clinging garments. Indian girls make an attractive picture, but sometimes looking in their faces brings one very sad thoughts. Some one has said : "They have looked at the hideous gods until the children have caught the gods' expressions." This is only true of some ; many have gentle, winning countenances and intelligent eyes.

Instead of knowing anything about the true God and Jesus Christ, the Hin-

du priest has horrible things to teach the young. He tells them that animals and trees and various things have the souls of men in them, and must be revered. The very ignorant people even worship these things. Monkeys, cows and peafowls inhabit the temples, where the floors are disgustingly dirty; and the walls are ornamented, or rather disfigured, with gross, vulgar designs. The forms and faces of innumerable gods, that the children are instructed to worship, are too hideous for imagination to picture. Contrast this condition with the Christian Sunday school; then pity surely comes into the heart for these many young souls in India, who are not at all wanting in the capacity for feeling, and enjoying the love of the Saviour. There are so many of them; how shall they all be told the true way of life? Because there are so many all the more need for earnest, speedy work among them. Christians of all lands should undertake a share in this great, rich field of mission work. Christianity is doing much for India now; but there is yet so much, even unattempted.



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